

TOWN OF AMHERST
PROPOSED NORTH PROSPECT-LINCOLN-SUNSET Local Historic District
Summary Report for Annual Town Meeting, May 2017

The proposed North Prospect-Lincoln-Sunset Local Historic District (LHD) is one of the oldest and most distinguished areas in the Town of Amherst, with an unusual history of racial and class diversity. Some parts of the neighborhood are already listed on the National Register of Historic Places, in the existing Lincoln-Sunset and Prospect-Gaylord National Historic Districts, but the National Registry does not offer the protection of an LHD. The proposed LHD includes 194 properties and gives Amherst a significant historic and cultural resource, with dozens of architectural gems that span late 1700s intact vernacular farmhouses to the striking blend of original 19th and 20th examples of Greek Revival, Gothic Revival, Italianate, Queen Anne, Colonial Revival, Neoclassical, Craftsman, and Tudor Revival styles.

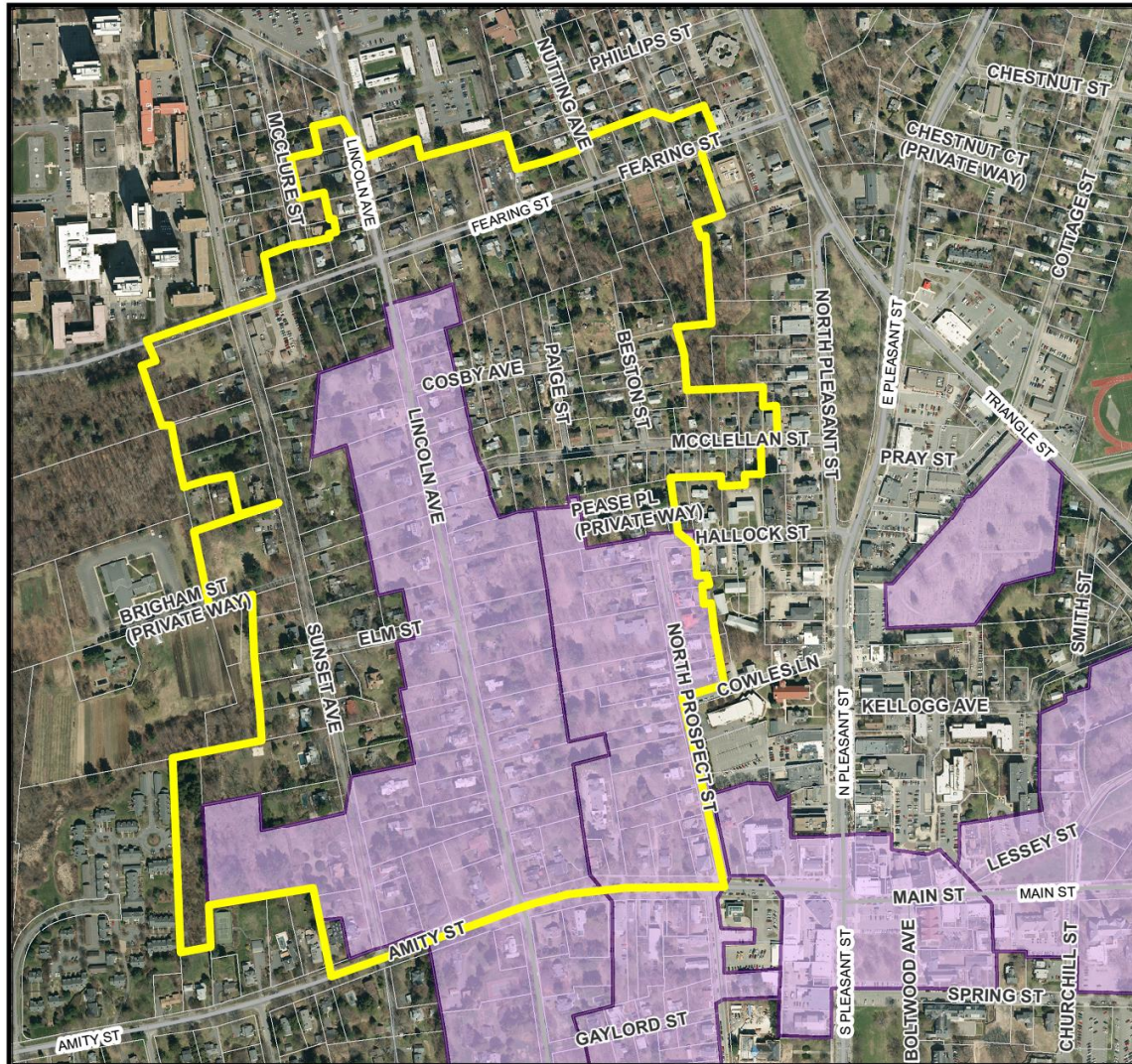
Beyond its two centuries of original and intact architectural examples, perhaps more than any other neighborhood in Amherst, the proposed LHD reflects and encapsulates Amherst's intellectual, cultural, and economic development between the Civil War and the Second World War (1865-1940). Of the eight stops listed on the online literary walking tour of Amherst developed by the Amherst Historical Commission and the University of Massachusetts, four are within the proposed LHD. Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Robert Frost, Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer Ray Stannard Baker, early feminist Mary Heaton Vorst, beloved children's author Norton Juster, Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court Harlan Fiske Stone, the poet Eugene Field and Doris Abramson, a trailblazer in African-American theater, are but a few of the luminaries who made their homes in the proposed LHD, as did countless professors, merchants, and businessmen and women of both national and international note and as well as many of Amherst's oldest names - Cowles, Boltwood, Jones, Pickering, and Dickinson.

More unusual is the fact that this neighborhood was never simply an enclave for rich or socially prominent Amherst residents. Laborers, artisans, craftspeople and servants lived and plied their trades within the same neighborhood. Generations of African-Americans and Irish built or bought homes in the area, some domestic workers for or employees of their more affluent neighbors, others self-employed and providing neighborhood services (building, roofing, and catering). Boston, McClellan and Paige were among the first racially mixed streets in New England. Moses Goodwin, Pastor and Mrs. (Dee) DaCosta and Mittie Hall Anderson, among the founders of the AME Zion in Amherst, lived on McClellan. Irish immigrants and their families settled here and built St. Brigid's around the corner on Pleasant Street. Prominent local architects, stonemasons, carpenters, laborers and builders were involved in the development of many homes throughout the neighborhood. Most of the houses they constructed, modest and stately alike, remain today very much the way they once were, interwoven in a colorful, inextricable tapestry.

If approved, the proposed North Prospect-Lincoln-Sunset LHD will constitute a significant architectural and historical resource for the entire Town of Amherst. An LHD designation will enhance the cultural zone that has recently been established in downtown Amherst and the leafy streets, broad lawns, back or side gardens, attractive streetscape and demographic history will intrigue visitors as well as residents of Amherst. It is unusual to have a two-century historic residential neighborhood, still architecturally intact, abutting both University and downtown.

PROPOSED LAYOUT

Remarkably, despite its close proximity to the downtown commercial area of Amherst, the proposed North Prospect-Lincoln-Sunset LHD retains its largely intact mid nineteenth-century to early twentieth-century architecture, streetscapes, and settings, which originated from its documented historical development pattern. The unusually well-preserved architecture of the district represents the diverse cross-section of people who built it, who lived there, and who contributed to the rapidly expanding economy.



Purple indicates the National Registry Districts portions of the proposed LHD.

The proposed LHD is a centrally located network of 9 residential streets (from east to west) Tan Brook, Fearing Street, North Prospect Street, Pease Place, McClellan Street, Boston Street, Paige Street, Cosby Avenue, Lincoln Avenue, Elm Street and Sunset Avenue. It includes portions of the adjacent Amity, Allen, and Hallock Streets.

Further information about the Massachusetts and Amherst basis for LHD's (GL 40C, 2005 Preservation Plan, 2010 Master Plan (Land Use, Cultural Resources) and 2012 LHD Bylaw can be found on the Amherst Town website for the proposed LHD:

www.amherstma.gov/BoardsandCommittees/Lincoln-Sunset-LHD-Study-Committee

WHAT IS A LOCAL HISTORIC DISTRICT

Local Historic Districts (“LHDs” hereafter) are the only reliable means of protecting publicly visible historic structures and landscapes and can be an effective and popular planning tool. An LHD subjects major exterior changes – demolition or significant modification of architectural features visible from a public way – to review by a locally appointed commission working according to locally developed standards. It does not interfere with existing zoning regulations. It concerns only the appearance of property, not its use. It does not prevent owners from making changes to their properties. It does not require owners to restore their properties. It allows maintenance and minor repairs. The Amherst LHD Bylaw (passed in 2012) leaves the color of house paint entirely un-regulated, encourages new materials and innovative design, and favors the use of solar panels. The purpose is to oversee architectural changes going forward into the twenty-first century. The Amherst Historic District Commission (established in 2012, see LHD Website for Rules & Regulations) can issue three types of certificates based on the evidence: Certificates of Appropriateness, Certificates of Non-Applicability and Certificates of Hardship.

For every building permit applicant, the first step is to contact the Town Building Inspector. That officer holds authority by delegation from the LHD Commission to see whether the building is within an LHD and whether any architectural change visible from a public way may need to be reviewed by the Commission. In many cases the project does not require review by the Commission. In some cases a written application for Commission approval is required.

Since this simplified procedure functions well, this report asks Town Meeting only to add another district to the purview of the Commission. This report does not call for any new enforcement mechanisms. It does not request any changes in the wording of the existing Bylaw.

RECOMMENDATION

A North Prospect-Lincoln-Sunset Local Historic District will preserve the still-visible and intact homes of this mixed-class, mixed-race neighborhood from the mid-19th to mid-20th centuries. Its structures, great and small, reflect the complex mosaic of business interests, workforce backgrounds, socio-economic class, race, and ethnicity, in the years between the 1860s and World War II. As evidence of a lived history and visually intact architecture, this LHD will enable Amherst to protect a unique local treasure for coming generations of residents and visitors to enjoy as testament to the vital forces that created Amherst during its formative period.

The LHD Study Commission recommends that Section 13 of the Amherst Historic District Bylaw be amended by adding the following:

Appendix 2: North Prospect-Lincoln-Sunset Local Historic District

The North Prospect-Lincoln-Sunset Local Historic District shall be a DISTRICT area under this Bylaw. The location and boundaries of the North Prospect-Lincoln-Sunset-Local Historic District are defined and shown on the Local Historic District Map of the Town of Amherst, Sheet 2016-2, dated March 2017, which is a part of this Bylaw. This Sheet is based on the current land records used by the Town Assessor. The delineation of the DISTRICT area boundaries is based on the parcel boundaries shown therein, except as otherwise apparent on the Sheet.

NORTH PROSPECT-LINCOLN-SUNSET LHD FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What is a Local Historic District (LHD)?

LHDs offer real, tangible forms of protection for the preservation of historic structures and communities. There are over 200 LHDs in over 120 towns and cities across Massachusetts. They can be as small as a single property or include hundreds of them. The Provincetown LHD contains almost 1,000 properties. The average LHD is around 100 properties. The entire island of Nantucket is an LHD. Many smaller towns than Amherst have multiple LHDs. Currently, Amherst has one – the Dickinson LHD -- 39 properties situated in the vicinity of the Dickinson Museum, including properties in the Dickinson National Register District.

In an LHD, any proposed change to exterior architectural features visible from a public way that would require a Town building permit is reviewed by the locally appointed Historic District Commission. There is no review of interior features. Also, a variety of exterior features are usually exempt from review, such as paint color, air-conditioning units, fences, storm doors and windows. The addition of solar panels is encouraged and not restricted as are innovative designs and new materials. An LHD doesn't mandate maintenance of properties. It DOESN'T prevent new building, development or rental conversions.

What are the benefits of an LHD?

An LHD prevents demolition of noteworthy structures without adequate review. It ensures that renovations and new structures are in keeping with the prevailing, existing architectural character and standards of the overall neighborhood and surroundings, while encouraging creative new design that is consistent in size or dimensions with other buildings in the neighborhood.

How does an LHD affect property values?

According to a publication on LHDs by the Massachusetts Historical Commission, property values in LHDs stay the same or increase at a faster rate than those in similar, non-LHD designated areas.

If my neighbors and I already maintain the historic character of our properties, why do we need an LHD?

By having an LHD, you can be assured that a NEW property owner across the street or next door also maintains the historic character of the neighborhood.

I thought that we were already in a historic district?

Some of the buildings in the LHD (mainly on Lincoln, Sunset and Amity streets) are listed on the National Register of Historic Places as part of two National Register Districts. However, the National Register is an honorary designation and offers only minimal protection from

construction using state or federal funds. By passing a Local Historic District, the historic and architectural character of a neighborhood based on its social, cultural and demographic history, can be protected.

How is an LHD created?

If there is strong interest in an LHD within a neighborhood, the town Select Board appoints a Study Committee to investigate the local district designation further. The Study Committee holds public meetings, seeks public input, holds public hearings, researches the history of the area and prepares a report on its findings. The final step is passage of a historic district bylaw by a two-thirds majority at Town Meeting.

If my house is included in the LHD, does that mean I have to make it look more historic?

No, you maintain the current look of your house as long as you would like. Again, an LHD only reviews proposed changes to exterior architectural features visible from a public way in order to maintain a consistent and coherent streetscape in the LHD. Routine maintenance of your property is exempt from review.

Who are members of the LHD Commission?

A local bylaw describes specifically how the Select Board makes appointees to the LHD Commission, usually consisting of local architects, realtors, residents and property and home owners of the district.

Does this mean that I can't paint my house any color I want?

No. You can paint your house any color you choose.

If my house was located in an LHD and I was constructing an addition that is visible from a public way, what would I have to do?

During the process of acquiring the building permit for your addition, the Building Inspector would let you know if you needed a certificate of appropriateness from the LHD Commission and advise you how to go about getting it. The Commission then reviews your proposed plans in discussion with you in terms of the existing character of the LHD and holds a public hearing. If the addition is appropriate within the overall LHD, the Commission issues a certificate which you present to the Building Inspector to get your building permit. The Commission may recommend modifications to your project and work with you to achieve them.

